



# BATTLEFIELDS AND BIRDSONG

The diaries of compass officer Collingwood Ingram offer a fresh perspective on life on the Western Front

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**H**ow much do any of us really know about the First World War? Survivors of that bloodiest of conflicts seldom spoke about their experiences, even to those closest to them, and it's impossible to imagine that life on the Western Front was anything other than four years of hell. It certainly was for most soldiers but there were a few who still found beauty and inspiration in their surroundings, despite the horrors of death and

destruction. Collingwood Ingram was one such man and his fascinating First World War leather-bound diaries provide a whole new insight into that most dreadful of wars.

Ingram was born in October 1880 in London to a well-to-do family. By the time he was in his thirties, his year had fallen into a fixed cycle: foxhunting in winter; birdwatching in spring; grouse-shooting in August; and deer-stalking in November. It was an enviable lifestyle and one he clearly enjoyed enormously, but then along came the First World War and that, you would expect, changed everything. In many ways it did but for Ingram, a gifted artist and exceptional ornithologist, it also opened up new and



unexpected opportunities. These he recorded in fascinating detail in his diaries.

Ingram wasn't posted to France until December 1916: he went as a newly qualified compass officer, aged 36. His job, adjusting the compasses of the primitive aircraft used in the conflict, was vitally important but it meant that he wasn't involved with either flying the planes or trench warfare. It was a job that required him to visit the numerous airfields of the Western Front, from St Omer to

Above: *Crashed Aeroplane* by John Singer Sargent, 1918. Right: Collingwood Ingram, who was stationed in France from 1916-18

Cambrai and St Quentin. Throughout his time in France he sought solace in the countryside, exploring the forests and farmland, the marshes and river valleys, noting and sketching everything he saw, from people to birds.

There's no doubt that Ingram was an exceptionally talented observer and field ornithologist, for he had a remarkable ability to identify virtually all the birds he saw by both sight and sound. You have to remember that this was long before the days of illustrated field guides and, at the time, the birdlife of northern France had been little studied. Ingram was particularly fascinated by the birds he found that were absent from his home county of Kent. He made numerous detailed observations of crested larks, for example, then a widespread species in northern France but one absent from this side of the Channel.

As a sportsman he was fascinated by the abundance of grey partridges he came across, noting in one of his first diary entries (17 December 1916) how "surprisingly plentiful" they were and "judging by the size of the coveys they could not have been shot at this year". Such an abundance of partridges was a great temptation to English officers on the Western Front and Ingram enjoyed a number of partridge-shooting forays, such as that on 30 August 1917 when he joined three wing commanders for a "little illicit partridge shooting" near St Omer, armed with his walking-stick gun, which he used for collecting bird specimens.

"Although I failed to make a contribution to the bag, I thoroughly enjoyed the jaunt, for birds were very plentiful. A piquancy was



added to the entertainment by the knowledge that we were harmlessly breaking a Military Regulation and from the fact that we were poaching in a most bare-faced manner."

On 10 October 1918, with the war nearly over, he had another partridge-shooting outing. "I borrowed a gun and 25 cartridges and spent a couple of hours among the abandoned trenches and wire entanglements south-west of Albert. Partridges were extraordinarily numerous but somewhat shy. I bagged five-and-a-half brace and lost three birds through not having a dog, so altogether I had a very pleasant afternoon's sport."

Boar-hunting was another sport he was able to indulge in, joining a party of hunters and their assorted hounds in the woods near Ochey on 1 November 1917. He was armed with an old pin-fire gun that he

had "borrowed with some difficulty". "The pack consisted of 10 – a heterogeneous assembly of various breeds and half breeds, ranging in size from a diminutive dachshund to a grizzly griffon. The old *piqueur* looked more like a disreputable tramp than a huntsman, but nevertheless he possessed a good hound voice and sounded a true note on his horn."

Ingram and his companions enjoyed a fine morning's sport, with both foxes and boar fired at, "but the bag was nil when we knocked off for *dejeuner*". He joined the hunters again five days later, this time working a forested ridge high above the Moselle. Again, "there was much evidence of boar, and on one occasion we heard a



“ An abundance of partridges was a great temptation to officers ”



troop quite close to us – loud, angry snufflings and the drag of their feet among the leaves – but the undergrowth was too dense for us to get a shot”.

#### HEAVY SHELLFIRE

Remarkably, despite being so close to the trenches, the Germans rarely got a chance of a shot at Ingram. His most notable escape came on 3 May 1918, when he and a fellow officer “decided to go to the top of Mont des Cats to see what we could of the War”. All went well until the Germans spotted the two men and their car and driver, and they came under heavy shellfire, retreating to “the friendly shelter of the hill”. Ingram notes dryly “the great black fountain of dirt” that, a mere 30 yards away, “shot skyward to the accompaniment of a loud heavy crash and the reeking smell of burnt powder”. His somewhat matter-of-fact diary account

concludes, “Our curiosity was more than satisfied. I suppose there are not many people left in France foolish enough to travel 60 miles to get under shellfire.”

During his time in France, Ingram travelled by car, bicycle and plane, flying in a BE2e and RE8 as well as a captured German aircraft; on one day in July 1918 he enjoyed a ride in a balloon. “Compared with the accustomed rush and roar of an aeroplane, the balloon seemed delightfully peaceful as it rose imperceptibly into the sky”. As a hunting man with an enthusiasm for horses, he also took the opportunity to ride whenever he had the chance. Most of the RAF squadrons had horses for their officers to ride, so Ingram would borrow one to explore the surrounding countryside.

Although he rode often, he rarely comments on the horses, except on 14 February 1917. “I had a pleasant jog across the fields and through a big woodland. The ground



Clockwise from top: Ingram's illustration *What is left of Chomplon, March 1918*; a blackbird; yellow wagtails; the artist's grave – he lived to reach 100



was too slippery for cantering and even at the moderate speed I took him, the sturdy little cob managed to fall with me." This didn't bother Ingram and he noted seeing flocks of greenfinches, yellowhammers and tree sparrows, and he observed that the wood was so quiet "that the footfall of a frightened hare made a very audible crunching noise as it scuttled through the undergrowth over the frozen snow".

#### BIRDS AT ALTITUDE

Ingram was clearly an avid reader of *The Field*, and one guesses that he had the magazine sent out to him France. He makes several references to items he had read in *The Field*, such as Lieutenant WNT Roper recording in the issue of 11 September 1917: "a plover (pee-wit?) at 6,000ft flying north. Wind at that height 25mph south." The altitude that birds flew at was a subject that fascinated him and the observations of those early pilots were the first definite clues to solving this mystery.

In his diary entry for 24 March 1918, he mentions hearing his first chiffchaff of the spring and remarks on another letter in *The Field*. "Someone writing over the initials LJ describes magpies in the war-stricken area that formed the Somme battlefields. They



66 Ingram became a regular contributor to *The Field* 99



Clockwise from above: Saint-Omer Cathedral; in Ingram's diary on 24 March 1918 he records hearing his first chiffchaff of spring; a crow's nest



erected their great domed structures on any part or stump that gave sufficient purchase... where one solitary tree or bush has survived the blasting effects of high explosives, three or even four pairs of magpies had each constructed a nest"

*Birdsong* was the title of Sebastian Faulks' moving novel of the First World War, and Ingram's writings remind us that there really was birdsong to be heard in Northern France during the war. Ingram survived the conflict and went on to become a regular contributor to both *The Field* and *Country Life*. In later years, he developed a passion for collecting, breeding and growing plants at his home at Benenden in Kent. His special interest were the Japanese flowering cherries, giving him his nickname of "Cherry" Ingram, by which he was widely known in the horticultural world. He died at the age of 100 in 1981. ■  
Extracts from *Collingwood Ingram's First World War diaries* are published in *Wings over the Western Front*, edited by Ernest Pollard and Hazel Strouts, and published by Day Books, Oxfordshire.